DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 041 925 TE 001 999

AUTHOR	Haslam, Gerald W.
TITLE	Two Traditions in Afro-American Literature.
INSTITUTION	California Association of Teachers of English, Redlands.
PUB DATE	Apr 70
NOTE	15p.
JOURNAL CIT	California English Journal; v6 n2 p7-21 Apr 1970
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Authors, Drama, *Historical Criticism, *Literary Genres, *Negro Literature, *Oral Expression, Poetry, Prose

ABSTRACT

Afro-American poets, dramatists, and prose writers have been affected by the tension between traditional African oral modes and various European-American written genres, as well as by the merger of "white taste and black need," which can be seen by examining the styles and themes of black literature in America from Lucy Terry's 1746 poem "Bar's Fight" to the present day "Soul On Ice." (MF)

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ED041925

California English Journal

APRIL, 1970 • Vol. 6, No. 2

Two Traditions in Afro-American Literature

GERALD W. HASLAM
Sonoma State College

In response to an interviewer's question, Ralph Ellison explained that, even as a very young man, he sensed the cultural dualism of black Americans, and resolved to create a personal synthesis: "I was taken very early with a passion to link together all I loved within the Negro community and all those things I felt in the world which lay beyond."[1] Ellison's statement is important for, throughout their long history in the United States, Negroes have tended to attain their highest plateaus of literary excellence when they merge their personal legacy of suffering with the eclectic national experience, not compromising in their own unique expression, but rather forcing an awareness of both its value and of its place in the larger culture.

Black people came to the New World with the earliest settlers, and have been part of this nation's development. They have produced literature in both the traditional oral modes of their African forefathers and the various written genre of European-Americans. Influenced by their initial experiences in North America, Negro slaves produced the plaintive poetry of spirituals, the bold lyrics of seculars, and countless tales, all in the oral tradition. This heritage—albeit in altered form—continues to be an important aspect of Afro-American culture: spirituals have their modern counterparts in gospel songs; seculars live on in the blues and its vast progeny; tales continue to proliferate.

The written tradition in black literature began with Lucy Terry's 1746 poem, "Bar's Fight." But its first elegant, and unquestionably talented,

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GERALD W. HASLAM, whose articles on American Literature have appeared in **Negro American Literature Forum, ETC., A Review of General Semantics, College English, Arizona Quarterly, Rocky Mountain Review,** etc., wrote this essay for the practical use of secondary teachers dealing with Afro-American literature. This paper first appeared in **Research Studies,** published by Washington State University, September, 1969. Mr. Haslam, who teaches in the department of English and Ethnic Studies at Sonoma, is presently preparing an anthology of Afro-American writing for secondary school use.

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representative was Phillis Wheatley, who was kidnapped from her native Senegal as a seven-year-old, but whose gifts were so exceptional that she was to become among America's finest poets before her death at thirty-one. American poetry at that time was, of course, generally less than outstanding, so that even Wheatley's finest work, such as these lines from "To the Earl of Dartmouth,"

> . . . Should you, my lord, while you pursue my song,
> Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
> Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
> By feeling hearts alone best understood,
> I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
> Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat:
> What pangs excruciating must molest,
> What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
> Steel'd was the soul and by no misery mod'd
> That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd
> Such, such my case, And can I then but pray
> Others may never feel tyrannic sway?
>
> (*The Poems of Phillis Wheatley* [Chapel Hill, 1966] p. 33)

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was certainly no better than many spirituals:

> I got a home in dat rock,
> don't you see?
> I got a home in dat rock,
> don't you see?
> Between de earth an' sky,
> Thought I heard my Savior cry,
> You got a home in dat rock,
> don't you see?
>
> (Traditional)

or their nonreligious counterparts, seculars:

> My ole Mistiss promise me,
> W'en she died, she'd set me free,
> She lived so long dat 'er head got bal',
> An, she give out'n de notion a'dyin'
> at all.
>
> (Traditional)

Indeed, there is a verve, a life, in the oral literature of slaves that is sadly absent from the written literature of their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century white neighbors. More important is the fact that slave songs and tales—particularly spirituals and seculars—represent new art forms; neither in Africa nor Europe had this precise combination of language and music developed. While a gifted writer like Phillis Wheatley was reflecting the tastes of her white counterparts by imitating British literary modes wth neoclassic poems written in the heroic couplets popularized by Alexander Pope, black bondsmen were producing the first truly American literature.

Even today, oral literature remains a vital element of Afro-American life; as folklorist Richard Dorson summarizes this phenomenon:

> **Only the Negro, as a distinct element of the English-speaking population, maintained a full-blown storytelling tradition. A separate Negro subculture formed within the shell of American life, missing the bounties of general education and material progress, remaining a largely oral, self-contained society with its own unwritten history and literature. (*American Negro Folktales* [Greenwich, Connecticut, 1967], p. 12)**

Because of the obstacles to conventional "literacy" that they have faced, black Americans have been forced to perfect their own literacy, a glib and finely refined use of spoken language, complete with many of the devices white Americans tend to employ only in poetry: alliteration, assonance, consonance, and so on. Listening to youthful blacks playing "the dozens," or reciting the endless variations of "the signifying monkey," one quickly realizes how thoroughly developed are oral literary forms among Afro-Americans.[2]

It is no coincidence that many of the greatest Negro writers have transferred the style and the tone of black speech to their writing. Langston Hughes, whose experiments with verse forms opened new vistas for American poets, employed the rhythms and words of the street:

> Strut and wiggle,
> Shameless gal.
> Wouldn't no good fellow
> Be your pal.
> ("To Midnight Nan's at LeRoy's," in *The Negro Caravan* [Arno Press, 1969], p. 368)

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Gwendolyn Brooks, a Pulitzer Prize winner, has captured the essence of big city ghetto language in her "We Real Cool."

(*Selected Poems* [New York, 1963], p. 73)

Writers of fiction, too, have converted Negro speech into compelling narrative media. Ernest Gaines created a brilliant first-person narration using the language of rural Louisiana in his often-anthologized short story, "The Sky Is Gray."

> **They got a girl sitting 'cross from me. She got a red overcoat, and her red hair plaited in one big plait. First I make 'tend I don't even see her. But then I start looking at her little bit. She make 'tend she don't see me neither, but I catch her looking that way. She got a cold, and ever' now and then she hist that little hankercher to her nose. She ought to blow it, but she don't. Must think she too much a lady or something. (*American Negro Short Stories* [New York, 1966], edited by John Henrik Clarke, p. 328)**

Speech is no more than the exposed peak of the cultural iceberg, as Ralph Ellison's fiction so well shows; his award-winning novel, *Invisible Man,* is, perhaps, the most imaginative projection of the quality and diversity of Negro folk culture in our national literature. In explaining why he avoided the popular Hemingwayesque expository style in writing *Invisible Man,* Ellison said he found that, when compared with the rich babble of idiomatic expression around him, "a language full of imagery and gesture and rhetorical canniness, it was embarrassingly austere."[3]

Like so many black writers, Ellison traces much of his stylistic freedom to the influence of James Joyce, who abandoned narrative traditions and utilized the rich oral heritage of English-speaking Celts. The similar richness of Irish and Afro-American speech makes it natural that members of those dialectic communities would be among the first to introduce spoken patterns into English-language fiction. And the relationship between Irish and Negro writers is not merely tacit; as Gaines has remarked: "I guess I want to create my own kind of Dublin."[4] In Ellison's novel, his protagonist remembers a college literature class in which a professor had discussed Joyce, saying: "Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated consciousness of his race, but one of creating the *uncreated features of his face.*" This passage might have been written by Joyce, but surely would only have been *said*—in America—by speakers

of Afro-American dialect, the one speech community that has retained a taste for playing with sounds.

There is yet another sense in which cultural dualism intrudes upon the artistic expression of Negroes: black writers have, from Jupiter Hammon's first published work in 1760 to the present, had to consider the tastes of largely white audiences in order to survive economically: Paul Laurence Dunbar, for example, felt trapped by the necessity to produce the minstrel rhymes favored by his audience at the turn of the century, while Fenton Johnson could find precious few readers for his harshly modern and somewhat nihilistic verse at the dawn of the supposedly joyous Negro Renaissance. Subtle and at times not-too-subtle constraints upon what and how much may be said in print have limited black writers, for while the black community, until very recently, has been unable to support writers, major publishing houses have remained white-dominated. On the other hand, the oral literature of blacks is a private reserve, created by and for Negroes, and reflecting with greater candor the world as they perceive it.

Perhaps the most interesting example of how white taste and black need have merged to produce literature may be found in the slave narratives of the nineteenth century. From Gustavas Vassa's early (1789) autobiographical sketch, through the 1829 publication of David Walker's *Appeal,* until the final revision of Frederick Douglass' memoirs in 1892, the slave narrative was the dominant and best-selling literary form employed by Negroes. And slave narratives, needless to say, were not read by slaves. The white interest in the private world of black experience—a world created by white inhumanity—continues, as will be shown, to be a major factor in contemporary American literature.

Today, in the aggressively proud literature of the Black Arts Movement two schools of writing have evolved: the Black Revolutionary Group and the Black Experience Writers. The outstanding member of the revolutionary group is LeRoi Jones, whose work has been perceptively summarized by Adam David Miller: "He is still trying to do something with whites, either flagellating them verbally, or parading them as beasts. The results are often vivid but shallow abstractions."[5] Black revolutionaries address themselves to whites, excoriating them. In *The Dutchman,* one of the finest American one-act plays of recent years, and Jones' best drama, a young black man, Clay, shouts at his white female antagonist:

> **. . . If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors. No grunts. No wiggles in the dark of her soul. Just**

> straight two and two are four. Money. Power. Luxury. Like that. All of them. Crazy niggers turning their backs on sanity. When all it needs is that simple act. Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane. (*The Dutchman* [New York, 1964], p. 35)

Aside from Jones' obvious talent, a talent often obscured by the very shrillness of his attacks, the revolutionary group has contributed to our national literature by helping blacks articulate the intensity of their frustration and anger, making knowledge of the depth and degree of that anger available to whites.

But a far more promising literary complex is emerging from the same movement: the Black Experience group, which is producing a literature about blacks for blacks, and which is very closely linked to the older, oral literary heritage in America. Led by Ed Bullins, whom Jones calls, "the most significant figure in American theatre today," the Black Experience writers are using Negro language patterns to reflect the experiences and values of Afro-America. It is an introspective movement that cares nothing for white conventions; as Bullins himself explains:

> . . . Most of my plays are about black people who have been crushed by the system, turned into gross distortions of what they can and should be, because they are denied knowledge of themselves and a space to grow. I don't deal with white society and culture because I despise what it has done and still attempts to do to us. ("The Electronic Nigger," *Ebony,* Vol. 23, No. 11 [September, 1968], p. 98)

Bullins' commitment to producing black drama for black audiences, and his refusal to consider either white ken or tastes, is exemplified by *Clara's Ole Man,* one of his award-winning one act plays. Negro viewers quickly sense the central truth of the drama — Big Girl *is* Clara's ole man — because they understand the connotations of the following exchange early in the play:

> CLARA, *fans fumes.* Uummm uummm . . . well, there goes the lunch. I wonder how I was dumb enough to burn the bacon?
> BIG GIRL. Just comes natural with you, honey, all looks and no brains . . . now with me and my looks, anybody in South Philly can tell I'm a person that naturally takes care of business . . . hee hee . . . ain't that right, Clara?†

†*The Drama Review,* 12:4 (Summer, 1968), p. 160.

Big Girl's lines reveal the sexual nature of her relationship with Clara, for the term "take care of business" is an expression used to indicate the fulfillment of one's sexual needs, as ghetto blacks very well know.

To a white audience the above-cited lines might simply be banter, so that the final overt revelation of the affair between Big Girl and Clara may appear inappropriate or, indeed, ill-conceived. Yet enjoyment of the play is linked to the audience's understanding of Big Girl and Clara's special friendship while they watch Jack, a fumbling suitor, try to charm Clara. Whites must accept the real language and value system of the black America Bullins reflects if they are to understand his work, for he is not apt to create a *Green Pastures*.

Clearly, drama is the genre in which the relationship between Negro oral and written traditions should most powerfully emerge, for it is a spoken form controlled by the playwright and director. But until the relatively recent past, the theatre was effectively closed to blacks; a man can write poetry in the quietude of his basement, and print his poems with a ditto machine, but a drama requires money and cooperation to actually live. Only since black has become beautiful — and profitable — have much money and cooperation been available to Negro dramatists.

The "Coon Shows" of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were the first well-known stage entertainment produced by blacks. It was not until these variety shows had been nearly forgotten, however, that "Shuffle Along" (1921) rekindled white interest in black musicals at the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1923 Willis Richardson's one-act play, "The Chip Woman's Fortune," became the first drama written by a Negro to be produced on Broadway. Two years later, Garland Anderson's "Appearances" — dealing with a black bell-hop's defense of himself from an unjust charge of rape — was the first full-length play by a Negro to be performed on Broadway. Later high points of the Negro theatre were Langston Hughes' "Mulatto" (1935), the story of the conflict between a white father and his mulatto son, which had the longest run of any play by a Negro author, 373 performances, prior to Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" (1958), which enjoyed 530 performances. Hansberry's play told the story of a Chicago family, the Youngers, and of the conflicting paths toward human dignity each member sought; it revealed the complexity of Negro society and the crippling effects of racism on black human beings. Winner of the Drama Circle Critics Award as the best play of 1958-59, "it remains the most perceptive presentation of Negroes in the history of American theatre," as Darwin T. Turner has shown.*

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*Turner, "The Black Playwright in the Professional Theatre of the United States of America, 1858-1959," BLACK DRAMA: AN ANTHOLOGY (Columbus, Ohio, 1970), edited by William Brasner and Dominick Consolo, p. 18.

Although drama is the most recent of Afro-American literary traditions, its particular ability to powerfully present both traditions in Negro American letters has attracted many of the brightest new talents now writing: Bullins, Jones, Marvin X, Ossie Davis, Ted Shine, and others.

Many younger Negro writers are turning away from either placating or excoriating white audiences, and are concerning themselves exclusively with black themes for black readers. In doing so, their work tends to become less defensive and bitter, often taking on a sharp, though subtle, irony along with an intense concern for what is real in black experiences; a more universal appeal is often the product, for such writers are concerned with the humanity and individuality they know so well. The young California poet Calvin Scott, for example, has written:

("Black am I," *Pretty Black Is the Color Soul* [Mill Valley, California, 1968], p. 14)

celebrating his unique humanity and its most visible distinct feature, his blackness. Yet he also shares, in other poems, experience common to all men:

. .

("Come soft . . .," *Pretty Black Is the Color Soul,* p. 16)

With black Americans reading and evaluating and criticizing the work of the Black Experience writers, a newer, fresher expression of Afro-American culture is developing, and is doing so in terms most meaningful to the people who have lived it.

The promise of the Black Experience Movement remains largely unfulfilled, for it is a new literary direction. If it continues to produce writers of Bullins' quality, and to improve its techniques as it has, America may finally enjoy a real Negro renaissance in literature.

It is customary, in applying historical method to a discussion of black literature, to mention briefly Dunbar and Charles W. Chestnutt and, possi-

bly, James Weldon Johnson as transitional figures who freed Negro writing from the parochial concerns and techniques of the nineteenth century and paved the way for this century's wealth of originality, then to rush on to the twenties and to Harlem and the "New Negro." Justly so, for the twenties did produce major advances in both technique and theme, as the work of Hughes and Jean Toomer shows, but the burst of creativity among black writers was largely the product of increased white interest in both Africa and Afro-America. What tended to result was a narrow, and largely exotic picture of black experience: cabarets, yes; poverty, no. As Edward Margolis observes, "the writers of the Harlem school treated Negro life self-consciously. . . ."[6] Both Toomer and Hughes are notable exceptions to the above generalization, however, for Toomer took his Negro heritage seriously and developed literary techniques for his own expanded conceptual vistas similar to those which Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, and others were constructing during the same period, while Hughes transcended his own youthful preoccupation with "New Negro" exoticism by allowing the milieu from which it was abstracted to exist in many of his poems, albeit subtly; when the night life of "The Weary Blues" ended,

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The singer stopped playing and went to bed.
while the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

(*The Negro Caravan*, p. 368)

As Arthur P. Davis has shown, it is the "eternal emptiness" of Harlem life in Hughes' early poetry that, along with his innovative genius, makes it outstanding.[7]

With the thirties and the depression—which, of course, really crushed black people, most of whom had been depressed before the depression—more realistic and generally broader views of Negro life were produced. The effect of general poverty was to unite black and white intellectuals and, in many cases, to expand racial concerns into class consciousness. Many black writers honed their work in little magazines, several of which were sponsored by the American Communist Party—ironically, the only political group in the nation willing to give Negroes something resembling equal rights. And the Federal Writers' Project allowed a large number of black writers to perfect their craft while associating with a diverse group of young white writers.

From such heterogeneous sources emerged Richard Wright, the most

influential single figure in all Afro-American literature. Wright, who had lived in both the South and the North, who had published in little magazines, who had affiliated with the American Communist Party and Federal Writers Project, seems in retrospect a prototypical writer of the thirties. With the publication of his 1940 work, *Native Son,* he produced America's finest proletarian novel, he created a watershed of potential conceptualization for future writers, and he continued the American tradition of deterministic naturalism, employing the shattered images of impressionism in league with the frightening inexorability of environmental realism. Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is black, the product of racism and of limiting Negro experiences; as Bigger himself tells it:

> **Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping through a knothole in a fence. . . . (*Native Son* [New York, 1940], p. 17)**

It was in his powerful use of symbols that Wright transcended the limitations of naturalistic writing, and the symbols he chose were those rooted in the most clandestine corners of the Afro-American psyche; he first linked the oppressive quality of white society with nature: "To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead." Then, through the images of icy gales and snow, he showed Bigger trapped by whiteness:

> **Then he leaped, headlong, sensing his body twisting in the icy air as he hurtled. His eyes were shut and his hands were clenched as his body turned, sailing through the snow. He was in the air a moment; then he hit. It seemed at first that he hit softly but the shock of it went through him, up his back to his head and he lay buried in a cold pile of snow, dazed. Snow was in his mouth, eyes, ears; snow was seeping down his back. His hands were wet and cold. Then he felt all of the muscles of his body contract violently, caught in a spasm of reflex action, and at the same time he felt his groin laved with warm water. It was his urine. He had not been able to control the muscles of his hot body against the chilled assault of the wet snow over all of his skin. He lifted his head, blinking his eyes, and looked above him. He sneezed. He was himself now; he struggled against the snow, pushing it away from him. He got to his feet, one at a time, and pulled himself out. He walked down Drexel Boulevard, not knowing just where he was heading, but knowing that he had to get out of this white neighborhood. (P. 187)**

Through the use of "objective correlatives," Bigger's physical and emotional environments are terrifyingly merged.

Wright's other major contribution to American literature was his demonstration that by drawing material from the black experience he knew so well, he could achieve universality; he produced, in fact, a kind of organic existentialism sans the tiresome intellectualization that mars so much consciously existential writing. His work is an exploration of the human condition.

The major black writers who have followed Wright—Ellison, Brooks, James Baldwin, Jones, Bullins, *et al.*—have consistently searched within for their individual expressions of the group experience, as well as their personal humanity, for a black writer must cope with all the myriad problems of being a man, as well as socially imposed racial dilemmas.

Consider the work of Ellison, who has produced only a small quantity of literature, but whose work has been of consistently high quality. In his essays, stories, and one novel, *Invisible Man*—voted the finest American novel since World War II by a *Book Week* poll of 200 authors, critics, and scholars—Ellison's strengths transcend his own brand of super- or suprarealism and post-impressionistic images, for he moved beyond obvious fictive devices into a still secret world of verbal images, of gestures, of masks, and of passions unique to the soul of Afro-America. Yet Ellison's novel is a blend; as he explains it:

> **My point is that the Negro American writer is also an heir of the human experience which is literature, and this might be more important to him than his living folk tradition. For me, at least, in the discontinuous, swiftly changing and diverse American culture, the stability of the Negro American folk tradition became precious as a result of an act of literary discovery. (*Shadow and Act* [New York, 1964], pp. 72-73)**

He has utilized the more advanced techniques of American and European literature in producing his masterpiece.

Ellison has said that he is concerned with experiencing what is real in his world, not what he is "supposed" to experience; in *Invisible Man* the quest for reality rather than appearance is pervasive—

> *(Invisible Man* [New York, 1952], pp. 152-53)

The novel's protagonist is a figure in search of a character, a man trying different masks, different guises, as he faces the fragmented world of an American Negro. Ellison is uncompromising in presenting the relatively flat characterization and formless plot that, in total, projects a complete and moving image. He did indeed forge a literary pattern suitable for the unique merger of harsh reality and fantasy that black Americans face in their quest for individuation, for identity:

> **. . . Who am I? I asked myself. But it was like trying to identify one particular cell that coursed through the torpid veins of my body. Maybe I was just this blackness and bewilderment and pain, but that seemed less like a suitable answer than something I'd read somewhere. . . .**
>
> ***Mother,* who *was* my mother? Mother, the one who screams when you suffer—but who? This was stupid, you always knew your mother's name. Who was it that screamed? Mother? But the scream came from the machine. A machine my mother? . . . (*Invisible Man,* p. 210)**

Ellison's poetic counterpart, in terms of both extraordinary technical competence and innovative imagination, is Gwendolyn Brooks, who has won nearly every major American poetry award possible, and who is justifiably considered, as Bruce Cutler says, "one of the very best."[8] The tragedy is that she remains the least known of major American poets. Her sense of sound, and of its poetic potential, sets her apart—

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("The Mother," *Selected Poems,* p. 4)

—and it is her deep personal commitment to the human worth and dignity of her subjects, which are largely drawn from Chicago's black ghetto, that makes her intensely real and, to use an over- and mis-used term, relevant today. She may very well be America's finest living poet.

James Baldwin, like Ralph Ellison, has been profoundly influenced by Richard Wright, whether he admits it or not. His literary career has had two high points: the first was his novel of the Negro church, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), which is a deep-water mark in his immersion into black traditions and topics; the polemic essays of the late 1950's and early 1960's mark the second high point, for they brought him enormous popularity, and they remain eloquent, important statements from an American intellectual. "Human freedom," he wrote in concluding one essay,

> **is a complex, difficult—and private—thing. If we can liken life, for a moment, to a furnace, then freedom is the fire which burns away illusion. Any honest examination of the national life proves how far we are from the standard of human freedom with which we began. The recovery of this standard demands of everyone who loves this country a hard look at himself, for the greatest achievements must begin somewhere, and they always begin with the person. If we are not capable of this examination, we may yet become one of the most distinguished and monumental failures in the history of nations. (*Nobody Knows My Name* [New York, 1962], p. 116)**

Two works of nonfiction prose—both more clearly related to the nineteenth-century tradition of slave narratives than to Baldwin's sophisticated rhetoric—have recently found large audiences: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (written by Malcolm with Alex Haley) and *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver. The former book is an unusual American success story for it chronicles compellingly Malcolm's rise from small-time hood, through the Nation of Islam, to black leadership and martyrdom. Malcolm summed up his own life, saying: "And if I can die having brought any light, having exposed any meaningful truth that will help to destroy the racist cancer that is malignant in the body of America—then, all of the credit is due to Allah. Only the mistakes have been mine."[9] It is a book every American should read.

The Cleaver book is an uneven, though certainly important statement of the condition of black Americans now. It reveals, in its best passages, the tortured internal topography of a black's soul. "One thing that the judges, policemen, and administrators of prisons seem never to have understood," Cleaver writes:

> **. . . is that Negro convicts . . . look upon themselves as prisoners of war, the victims of a vicious, dog-eat-dog social**

> system that is so heinous as to cancel out their own malefactions: in the jungle there is no right or wrong. (*Soul On Ice* [New York, 1968], p. 58)

The emergence of the contemporary Black Arts Movement has led Afro-American literature once more into an inward examination, a probing of its own values similar to that of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, yet better because it is concerned with the mundane as well as the exotic in black experience, and it has a now-well-established tradition of free expression to encourage candor. The work of Jones, Bullins, Gaines, Larry Neal, Don L. Lee, John A. Williams, Johnnie Scott, William Melvin Kelley, Calvin Scott, Dudley Randall, and a host of other able artists demonstrates the vitality and originality of modern black writers, just as it further shows the enduring quality of black folk literature. In Melvin Van Peebles' poetic monologue, "The Dozens," even the patterned insults so common in black street language are revealed to be just what they are, an art form: "Your girl got so many wrinkles on her belly," the speaker screeches, "she need buttons to keep her drawers up!" Then, before his adversary can respond: "You ain't half the man you' momma is!"[10]

Throughout Afro-American literature, the greatest artists have tended to be those who merged the two traditions—written/Euro-American with oral/Afro-American. As Ellison has commented concerning his own folk culture:

> . . . in spirituals along with blues, jazz and folk tales, it has . . . much to tell us of the faith, humor and adaptability to reality necessary to live in a world which has taken on much of the insecurity and blues-like absurdity known to those who brought it into being. For those who are able to translate its meanings into wider, more precise vocabularies it has much to offer indeed. (*Shadow and Act*, p. 73)

But Ellison tempers his statement with what is, probably, the most important assertion of all: "for the novelist, of any cultural or racial identity, his form is his greatest freedom and his insights are where he finds them."[11] Ultimately each writer stands as an individual synthesis of the cultural and racial forces that have shaped him.

Notes

1. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1964), p. 31.
2. See, for example, Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (eds.), *The Book of Negro Folklore* (New York, 1959), for evidence of Negro oral literature.
3. Ellison, p. 112.
4. Ernest Gaines, conversation with the author.
5. Adam David Miller, "It's a Long Way to St. Louis: Notes on the Audience for Black Drama," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Summer, 1968), p. 150.
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